

# The Changeling

Rosemary Sutcliff



Antelope Books

## THE CHANGELING

"I cannot hate it — it is so *small*," said Murna, as she gazed down at the tiny wizened baby left to her by the Dark People, who had stolen her own fine, healthy son. The Dark People lived in the hills and on the barren moors. They were feared by the Epidii Tribe, who, when they saw the dark changeling baby, felt a great foreboding, and wished him dead. But Murna and her husband, Conan the Red, grew to love the child, and brought him up as their own son. Then came the day when things went ill with the Tribe, and Tethra, the Changeling, the small-dark one, was forced to leave his adopted People, and to take to the hills and the wild places to seek his own kind.

*Jacket design and Illustrations by*  
**VICTOR AMBRUS**

This is a Hamish Hamilton  
ANTELOPE BOOK  
for children





## *The Changeling*

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HAMISH HAMILTON

LONDON

*First published in Great Britain 1974  
by Hamish Hamilton Children's Books Ltd.  
90 Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3PT*

*SBN 241 89019 5*

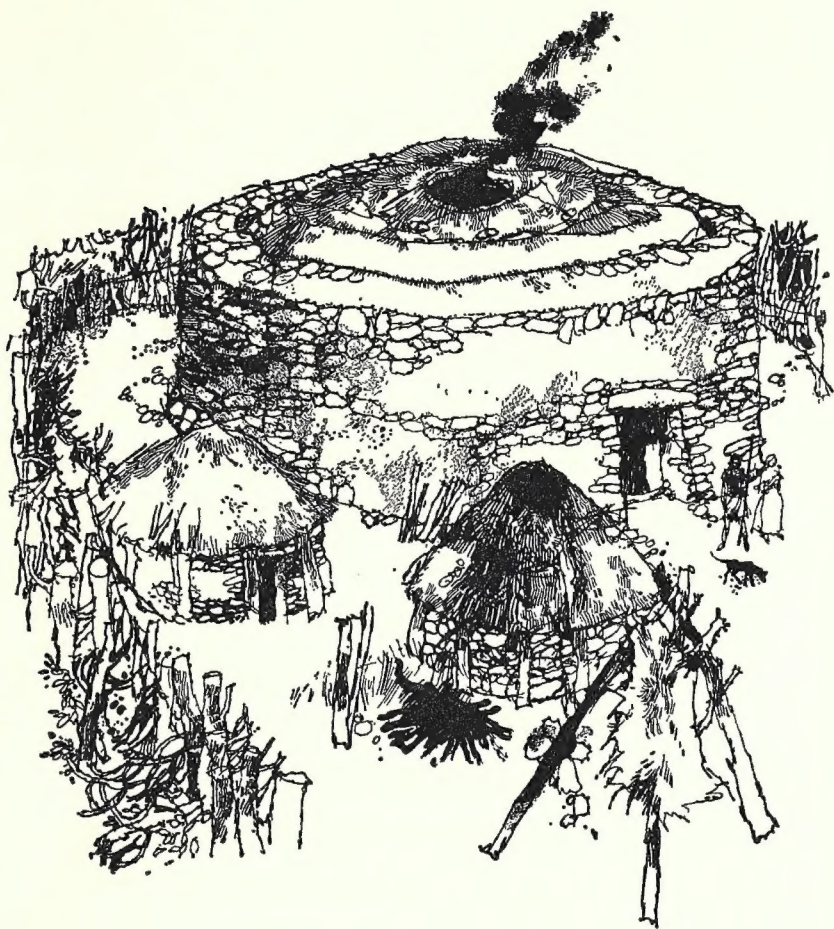
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**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN  
BY EBENEZER BAYLIS AND SON LTD  
THE TRINITY PRESS, WORCESTER, AND LONDON**



1551  
ON the flat coastwise strip below the place where the Glen of the Chariot-Crossing opened towards the Western Sea, stood the home of Conan the Red. Conan that was a Clan Chieftain of the Epidii, the Tribe of the Horse. All up and down the Glen there were other settlements of the Clan, but this was the home of the Chieftain.

Byres and store sheds and grain pits clustered companionably within a stockade that had long since taken root and become a blackthorn hedge. And in the midst of all, the houseplace,



big enough to shelter as many families as there were fingers on Conan's spear-hand. It was shaped like a huge wheel, this houseplace; its rim a dry-stone wall backed by a turf bank, its spokes stone walls running inward, so that between each wall and the next was a little room open to the wide central space where the fire of peat and driftwood and heather snarls burned from year's end to year's end on a hearth of rammed clay. The side rooms were roofed with turfs, but the central space was roofed like a tent with dappled ox hides from the herd. And high on the single birch trunk that held up the crown of the roof hung the smoke-blackened skull of a horse; for was not a horse the Totem of the Tribe?



In the winter, the few cattle who could be saved from the yearly slaughtering and salting-down were kept under cover and fed on bracken and birch fodder, and the skin boats that Conan and his people used at the fishing and the seal-hunting were carried far up the beach and lashed down secure against the thundering westerly gales, and in the houseplace the seal-fat lamps burned all day, and the household gathered about the fire, the women spinning and weaving the wool of their few little dark sheep, the men busy with the making and mending of tools and weapons, and all the tasks that were saved up to be seen to when the weather was too bad for anything else.

They were gathered so, one evening



in the darkest depth of winter, Conan, and his wife Murna, and his brothers and their wives and children, and the Old One who was brother to the last Chieftain, and the dogs. Yesterday there had been only six children in the houseplace, but today there was a seventh, Conan's firstling, wrapped in a piece of soft old striped cloth and curled in the crook of Murna's arm. And the dogs came nosing at him, curiously, because he had about him the smell of new birth. One, thrusting too eagerly, woke the baby, and he cried, bleatingly as all very young things cry. And Murna his mother, half-laughing and half-exasperated, pushed the big brindled head away.

"Off now! Away with you, you great



hairy thing!" And then bent closer over the small new son, rocking him in the curve of her body. "Hush, then! Husheen, little foal!"

The Old One, whose favourite hound she had pushed away, said sourly, "Aye, aye, drive off the dogs that mean no harm. You may find it none so easy to drive off the Dark People, I am thinking."

Silence closed in over his words. And at the heart of the silence was the salty spitting of the green driftwood flames upon the hearth, and on the far-most edge of the silence was the sounding of the sea. Ishtoreth, the Chieftain's youngest brother, made the sign against ill luck. One of the women glanced behind her into the shadows . . .



Long before the Epidii came following their white horse out of the sunrise, long before any of the Golden People, the little Dark Folk had been the lords of the land. They were the People of the Hills, the hunters and the growers of corn. They were the builders of the great circle of standing stones on the high moors inland. But their slender weapons tipped with the dark blue flint had been no match for hard cutting bronze swords, and spears tipped with the magic grey fire-metal called Iron. And so the Epidii had driven the Dark People away into the barren moors and waste places, and made their own settlements on the good land. But still, they did not go too near the Standing Stones, even in daylight; and when anyone



spoke of the Dark People, they looked behind them into the shadows . . .

“What is it that you mean?” Murna asked at last, as though pretending not to know could keep the thing further away.

“Always it is the seventh child in a household that they will be stealing if the chance comes to them,” the Old One said, with a kind of mournful relish, chewing ungratefully on a piece of soft deer meat that Murna had saved for him especially because of the fewness of his teeth. “It is only a seventh child that their Horned God will be accepting in place of one of their own, when the time of Sacrifice comes round.”

Conan looked up from the new spear that he was shafting, and said fiercely,

“Do you think we are not knowing that already? Cease your croaking, or I will try out this new spear of mine in your belly!”

The Old One spat out a lump of gristle. “The times have changed, and the young have no respect for their elders! Not even the Chief would have dared to speak so to the Old One in your father’s day!”

“In my father’s day—” Conan began.

But Murna was tired of quarrelling. There was always so much quarrelling on the men’s side of the hearth, especially between her Lord and the Old One. “See,” she said holding the baby up between her two hands, “I have hung a blue bead round his neck to keep all harm from him; and he shall





never leave my sight for a year, until he is too old for the Dark People to have—any use for him. Any use at all.”

But before three moons had come and gone, in the first days of spring when the birch and alder buds were thickening, Murna went down to the stream with the other women, to wash their clothes of the winter's dirt. She laid the babe down beside her in a little hollow of the alder roots, where she could keep him clear in view, and set to work, laying the garments of heavy woollen stuff on a flat stone at the water's edge, and beating them with another smaller stone.

For a while, the women worked together, laughing and chattering. It was



good to feel the world quickening again, to feel the beginnings of warmth in the sun, and smell the soft green smell in the wind after the long cold darkness of the winter that was past. And then, into a pause in their chattering, there sounded a strange bird-call, wild and high and sweet, such as none of them had ever heard before. To every woman it seemed as though the call were in some way meant for her, and every one of them looked round, Murna with the rest. Something flashed downstream. Not the blue flash of a kingfisher, but something stranger, more shining and yet more shadowy. And looking after it, Murna's sight was caught and dazzled by the low sunlight through the budding twig-tangle. And



when the sun-dazzle let her go, and she looked round again, there in the hollow of the alder roots, instead of her own red-haired baby, lay a tiny creature with great dark eyes in a little wizened face,

and soft dark hair like feathers on his head; and round his neck on a leather thong, a curiously striped pebble with a hole in it.

A great coldness seemed to close itself round Murna's heart, and she screamed; but the coldness would not give her enough breath to scream with, so that only a dreadful frozen whisper came out.

“My baby! *My baby!*”

The other women turned, and saw what she saw, and set up a great wailing of their own.

But after that first cry, Murna was silent, and stood staring down at the creature that lay staring back at her with those dark old, old eyes that seemed to know all things since the world began.





And first she thought, "I will carry it up on to the moor and leave it for the wolves," and then she thought, "I will throw it into the running water, this thing that is not my baby. It will be quicker and simpler that way, and I shall scarcely have to touch it." But even as she stooped to catch it up and throw it from her into mid-stream, the little wizened face crumpled like a dark poppy bud, and, frightened by all the noise and strangeness, the thing set up a thin high bleating. The sound pierced its way into Murna, into the cold, empty darkness of her inmost places. And against herself, as though it were not she who was doing it, she picked up the ugly changeling baby, not as an evil thing to be flung from her into the

swift killing water, but only as a crying child.

Somewhere, the bird called again, far off now, and echoing, like distant mocking laughter.

A long while later, Murna was standing beside the hearth in the houseplace; and still she held the dark stranger baby in her arms.

“If you leave him out for the wolves,” she was saying, “then you must bind me and leave me for the wolves also, for it was I who looked away when the bird called.”

“That is a true word,” said the Old One; and there was a low murmuring among the others about the hearth.

But Conan spoke for the first time in



a long silence, looking angrily about him. "The magic of the Dark People, no one can withstand."

"Aye, speak for her, she is your woman!" The Old One turned once more on Murna. "I say again, that *thing* must be left for the wolves. If we keep it, ill luck will come upon the Clan."

"Why? Because the Old One says so?"

"Because he is of the Little Dark People, who are our enemies."

Murna said, holding the baby closer, "He is too little to be anyone's enemy!"

"Little, he is indeed!" Conan's voice was suddenly rough with anger. It was one thing to speak for his woman, but this was another thing altogether. "A

little, starveling creature, best drowned like the runt of a litter! Why should you have it in your heart to keep it in place of my fine small son?"

"Oh Conan, my husband, leaving this one to the wolves will not bring you back your fine small son! Those that are taken by the Little Dark Folk do not return."

Conan let out a roar like a baffled bull. "All the more reason for you to hate this *thing!*"

And suddenly, something broke in Murna, and she gave a long, despairing wail. "I began to hate it! I meant to leave it for the wolves—or cast it into the stream. But it cried, and I picked it up before I knew. And it curled in my arms and nuzzled for milk because it





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was hungry. And now it is too late. I cannot hate it—it is so *small!*”

“Then because of it there will come black days for the Clan, black days for all the People of the Horse,” said the Old One, and spat into the fire.

But the years went by and the years went by, with no more of sorrow than comes to any people. Harvest followed seed time. Other children were born in the Glen; old people died. The men fished and hunted; the women tended the fire and the cattle and the barley plots.

And at last the time came when Tethra—they called him Tethra, the small dark one—was within little more than a year of the age when all the boys

of the Horse People must go to Sacred Place for their hidden days with the priestkind. The three lost days during which they must lay aside their boyhood as though they died, and come back to the Feast of New Spears reborn as Warriors of the Tribe.

And then the black days came.

There was a bad harvest and a long wet winter with sickness first among the horses and cattle and then among the people all up and down the Glen; and at the spring sealing, one of the seal boats was overturned with the loss of all three men on board; and one of them the Chieftain's youngest brother.

"The Sun Lord is angry! Did I not say there would come black days for the Clan, if we kept that cub of the

Dark People?" said the Old One, sitting beside the Council fire. He had no teeth at all now, and spluttered when he talked, and the skin of his bald head twitched; but his eyes were bright with the old anger. And there was a growl of agreement among the elders of the Clan.

Conan stood up and stared at him down his nose. "You say many things, Old One. You say and say and say, and always evil things!" He looked round him, frowningly, at the warriors of the Council Ring. "I did not want the boy, when Murna my woman would be keeping him. But I yielded to her. And since she died, and her own girl-bairn with her, he has grown to be son to me! And son he shall remain!"



“And if it is true that the God is angry?” said one of the warriors.

“It is in my mind that it is the Old One, more than the Sun Lord, that is angry,” said Conan.

Another warrior raised his head. “It was your own brother that was drowned at the seal hunting.”

“As he would have been drowned if we had left Tethra to the wolves.”

A third warrior spoke up. “Maybe you were not sad to see your brother drown. Other chiefs before Red Conan have been afraid of a brother coming too near the hearts of the Clan!”

“That is a lie!” Conan shouted. “Ord Long Arm lies in his throat!”

The Old One, having heard nothing of what came after, took up the talk.



again where he had laid it down and lost touch with it. "A son dark and wizened like a heather root! What son is *that* for a Chieftain of the Golden People?"

"That is for the Chieftain to say!" said Conan, towering over them.

There was a little silence, and a charred birch branch collapsed into the hollow of the fire, sending up a flight of sparks that drifted away on the light sea wind.

Then the Old One said, grinning, "*It is for the Clan to say!*"

And all the while, squatting far back among the boys and women on the outer fringes of the Council Ring, Tethra listened and felt sick. He knew, as he had always known, that he was

not of the Golden People. But Conan the Chief had been all the father he needed; and until the black days came, and people began to look at him strangely, he had given it little thought. Now he knew that the time had come to think hard and quickly. He slipped backwards out of the crowd, without anyone noticing his going; and away between the turf-roofed out-sheds to the stockade gateway, and down towards the shore.

And there, as he lay face down in the lee of an upturned boat, with the tide creaming out beyond the shingle ridge, and the daylight fading, he let his thinking catch up with him.

“I do not belong with these people; they are not *my* people, and I do not



belong here at all . . . If I stay, there will be trouble between Conan my father and the warriors of the Clan . . . Bad trouble; so I must go away. There is a pain within me, and I do not understand—I do not understand. But I must go away . . .”

He got up, and began to walk in the deepening twilight along the shore, bent a little over the pain inside him, as a wounded man will walk bent together over the wound. At first he thought the simplest thing might be to crawl into a hollow of the dunes somewhere a long way down the coast where no one would find him, and lie down and die. But his feet turned him inland through the hazel scrub, and carried him, without his knowing at all clearly where he

was going, up towards the circle of Standing Stones on the high moors. He had never been that way before, for the Horse People feared the place, and he had feared it with them. But he was not of the Horse People, the Golden People, and his feet knew the way as surely as though they followed the road home, though long before he reached the place, the dusk had closed in to full dark.

And when he saw the tall stones standing like warriors about him, black against the lesser darkness of the night, he was not afraid. The fear had belonged to his old life that was lost and over. There was only a great weariness in him; and he lay down at the foot of the tallest stone, and curled up close, like a hurt animal, with his knees to his chin.

He was too tired even to think any more, and so sleep took him.

When he woke, it was morning, and a little thin wind was shivering through the young heather, and making drifts and eddies in the white mist that hung between the Standing Stones, and the green plover were calling. And out of the mist, the faces of men looked down at him; men standing all round him; little dark men leaning on their spears. And beside him at the foot of the tall stone, lay the carcass of a freshly slain deer.

They pointed at him and spoke together in a tongue that was thin and quick and dark like themselves, yet kin to the tongue of the Horse People, so



that it was on the edge of his understanding. Then one of them, who seemed to be the leader, stooped over him and took up the striped pebble with the hole in it, which he still wore on a thong round his neck. The others crowded closer to look, and the leader said, speaking slowly and carefully, for Tethra to understand, "This pebble, how comes it round your neck?"

"It was round my neck when I was born," Tethra said, meaning, as long as he could remember.

The little dark hunters looked at each other, and nodded; and drew in their breath, hissing, between their teeth. "It was round his neck when he was born."

And one of the men spread his own hand and held it beside Tethra's, and

looked at the two together, dark-skinned and narrow. "And assuredly he is of one blood with us."

Tethra sat up, and scrambled to his feet. "Surely I am of the Dark People," he said, feeling as he did so that he was letting go the last strand that held him to his old life.

"Yet you wear the clothes of the Golden People."

"I have lived among the Golden People—a while and a while."

"And now?"

"No more now," Tethra said dully.

They spoke together again, and then the leader turned back to him and said, "Wait, while we do what must be done here, then let you come with us."

So Tethra drew aside and sat on his

heels, while they cut certain pieces from the carcass of the deer, and laid them, together with a tuft of hair from its tail, on a bed of fresh-pulled heather at the foot of the tallest standing stone; and when all was done, and they picked up the carcass slung between two of them on a spear, the leader beckoned to him, and he got up, and followed where they went. The morning mist was in his head, and there seemed nothing else to do.

Far over the moors, they came to a hidden hollow, where a few turf bothies huddled within the shelter of a thorn hedge. Bothies crouching so low to the ground that only the narrow door-holes in their sides and the wisps of hearth smoke that hung above them



showed that they were not the barrows of the dead, but the homes of living people.

As they single-filed through the gap in the hedge where the night-time thorn bush had been dragged aside, there came out to meet them a woman wearing a tunic of blue dyed marten skins, and a necklace of dried nuts and seedpods and green woodpecker's feathers, who carried herself like a queen.

She looked at the deer's carcass, and then at Tethra, and then at the leader the of hunting band. "You have had good hunting. But who is this that you bring with you?"

"Ia, we found him asleep in the Holy Place," said the hunter. "He said that he is of our People, and indeed one eye

enough is to see that for truth. So when we had made the Hunting Offering before the Horned One, we brought him back with us."

The woman Ia nodded, and looked again at Tethra. "Let him speak for himself. What name are you called? And where are you come from, before the Holy Place?"

"I am Tethra, from the Chief's settlement, where the Glen of the Chariot-Crossing turns towards the sea."

"Tethra . . . That is a name of the Golden People. And the settlements in the Glen of the Chariot-Crossing are settlements of the Golden People."

"I was left to the Golden People before my eyes were well open, in place of the seventh child that was taken





from them." Tethra's voice was toneless and dead-level, and he stared at the ground in front of the woman's feet. "They reared me, as men rear a stray wolf-pup, but now there is ill fortune on the Clan."

"And they say it is your doing and so they drive you out."

"Yes—no. It would have come to that. But the Chief my father—my—almost father, would not have it so. If I had stayed, there would have been black trouble between him and his warriors." Tethra's voice cracked in his throat. "Blood on the ground, because of me. And I am of the Dark People, after all. So I came away."

But the woman had bent forward quickly, startled and no longer listen-

ing to him. Her hand flashed out, quick as the strike of a snake. "That ring-stone—let me look—"

"It is mine; it is the only thing that is truly mine," Tethra said. "It was round my neck when they found me."

There was a long silence; and a faint murmuring began here and there among the hunters and their women who had gathered to look on. Then the woman Ia said, "Little son, I know. It was I who put it there, twice seven springtimes ago."

Tethra raised his head slowly, and looked into her face for the first time, into the long dark eyes that were waiting for him. "You?"

"I. I am your mother."

Bewilderment rose in him; too many

things were happening in too short a time; and he felt lost, as though he had walked into a peat bog and the very ground were dissolving under his feet; and he cried out as though for safety and something to cling on to, "If you are my mother, why did you leave me?"

She let the striped pebble drop back into the hollow of his neck; and set her hands on either side of his face, and looked at him long and deeply. "Ah no; do not you be thinking that I betrayed you. When the time comes for the Seven-Year Sacrifice, it is allowed to the mother of the chosen babe, to find, if she can, a seventh child of the Golden People to die in his stead. But she must leave her own

babe in place of the one she takes, to live or die. That is the Law."

So Tethra returned to his own people; and knotted in the thong that bound back his hair, he wore the three kestrel feathers of high rank, for Ia his mother was the Woman of the Village, she who had her bothie to herself, and wore the Barley Mother's Mask at seedtime, and spoke and listened between her people and the Ancient Ones. Little by little, all summer long, he learned and grew used to their way of life that was strange to him, until at last there were moments when it seemed as though he had never lived among the Golden People at all. But still, he would creep away sometimes, over the





high moors and down into the Glen of the Chariot-Crossing, to watch from a distance the life of his old home.

And all the while, as he lay watching among the hazel scrub, there was the old pain inside him, and he told it to the sandpiper and the curlew. "There is a stone in my belly; and it hurts—it hurts—and it is a thing I do not understand."

In the early days of autumn, Conan's people came together from all up and down the Glen, to hold a great deer hunt for meat to smoke for the winter. And lying hidden behind a rocky outcrop on the hillside, Tethra watched the boys and the young warriors beating the head-high bracken while the older and more skilled hunters lay waiting



among the furze and the birch cover further up the Glen. He saw the hounds questing to and fro, and heard them giving tongue on the sea-scented, bracken-scented air. He saw a young stag break cover, red and strong and not yet afraid, making for the higher



ground; he saw the hunters spring up with their slings and throw spears in the path of the running beast, and the stag swerve away from them, doubling in its tracks, its head held high. In a

while, slipping from cover to cover as though he himself were being hunted, he saw the kill.

All that day, unknown to any of them, he hunted with the Golden People, until the shadows grew long and the sun was westering over the sea. The hunting was good, and they killed again and again. There would be a great building of fires and smoking of deer meat all up and down the Glen in the next few days.

And then they put up one last beast, a great twelve-point stag, a chieftain among his kind. And again the hunt was on. It moved quickly, hounds and men, spear-tipped by the burnished red of the fleeing deer, all scudding across the moors with the speed of a spring-

time cloud-shadow before the wind. And Tethra had hard going to keep up with it without being seen. He had fallen a little behind when at last they brought the deer to bay, and he could not see clearly what happened. But it was all so quick that even if he had been close at hand it would have been over almost before he knew. He saw for one moment as he ran, the deer's spent and frenzied effort to break clear from the ring of hounds and hunters; he caught one glimpse of Conan springing in with shortened spear to meet the desperate charge. And then—there was a kind of shock and a swirl of movement; a distant shouting; and Conan—Conan suddenly all arms and legs that seemed not properly joined

together, caught on the great antlers, flung upward, falling all asprawl in the trampled heather. And the stag, with a snarling worry of hounds at its throat and flanks, slowly crumpling to the ground almost on top of him.

On the edge of a thorn break, Tethra crouched with his fists driven against





his mouth. Inside him there was a great crying-out. "My father! Oh, my father!" But he made no sound at all.

Down below, they made a framework of spears with a couple of cloaks lashed over it, and presently they



carried the Chieftain away, and after him the stag, slung across the back of a hunting pony. And the high glen was quiet again, save for the green plover crying, and the little wind that sometimes rose with sunset shivering through the barbed thorn branches.

Then Tethra got up, and began to run, back towards the village of the Dark People.

It was well past nightfall when he reached it; but Ia his mother saw his face by the light of the fire and the smoking fat-lamp, as he stumbled down the rough earthen steps into the bothie; and she gave a little cry, and set down the bowl of barley stirabout that she had been keeping warm for him among the ashes.



TC-E

“What is it? What ill thing has happened?”

Tethra was sobbing for breath, and he could scarcely get the words out. “They were hunting, and he must have missed his thrust, and the deer got him on its antlers—”

“Who?” said Ia, getting slowly to her feet.

“My father—my—Conan the Chief.”

“So. Is he dead?”

“I do not know.” Tethra shook his head. “They carried him away head foremost as men carry the living.”

His mother took him by the shoulders. “And whether he lives, or whether he dies, that is no longer anything to you.”

And after a little, sullenly, and as



though he repeated a lesson, Tethra said, "It is not anything to me."

But next day, and every day after, he went back over the high moors to the Glen of the Chariot-Crossing, and crept as close as he dared in the twilight, to hear the men talking as they folded the cattle or stood leaning on their spears in the gateway. He never told Ia where he went, and she did not ask, until nine days were gone by. But the ninth night when he came back to the village, he told her. "They say that the wounds do not heal, and the flesh round them sickens; and that he burns up with the wound fever."

"And what is that to us?" said Ia.

He went close to her and put his hand over hers. "Ia my mother, you



are skilled with herbs. When Garan cut his thigh to the bone last spring, you spread green healing magic on the wound, and now you can scarcely run your thumbnail along the scar."

"The People of the Hills have many skills that the Golden Ones have forgotten. That is why they are afraid of us. It is when people are afraid that they grow cruel."

"Conan was not cruel to me," Tethra urged. "He would not let them cast me out. My mother, oh my mother, give me a healing magic and let me go."

"Little Cub, what is it to you? *We* are your people."

Very slowly and deliberately, Tethra took his hand away from hers. "No," he said, wretchedly.

A long stillness came down between them; and then Ia, too, said, "No," and her voice was dry and flat with grief. "Take a wolf-cub young enough from his own kind, and rear him with the dog-pack, and he will run with the dog-pack, and hunt wolf when he is grown . . . I will give you the healing magic."

Before next morning's light, Ia took a deep wicker creel and went out, up to the highest moors and down into the glen woods for the herbs she needed; and at dusk, when she returned, she made up the fire on the hearthstones, and pulled the deer-skin apron tight on its pegs across the doorway; and she let down her hair and made a singing magic.



She took roots and leaves and berries, and cast them into fast-boiling water; and others she bruised and pounded with wild goose grease to make a salve. And all night long the people of the village heard the faint drone of the singing-magic that she made; and no one went near the bothie. Tethra, lying wakeful in his usual sleeping-place under the grain store, heard it most of all. And at the time of white mist and morning star, she set aside what had come of her night's work, and went to find the boy.

"I have made the magic. Come now and eat, before you go from here."

Tethra crawled out from under the grain store and followed her back to the bothie; and ate the barley bannock

and wild honey that she gave him, though it turned to dust in his mouth so that he could scarcely swallow it. He got up, still chewing the last mouthful. "Now give me the magic, or it may be too late."

Ia reached behind her into the shadows, and brought out what he asked for. "Here is the Healing Magic. When you come to your Golden Chieftain, you must give him to drink what is in this flask. It will make him sleep and help to drive away the fever. Then—now listen, for all this you must remember—you must take the biggest skin rug that can be found, and lay him on it, with the herbs from this bundle on his breast and all about him, and fold him close in it. And the women

must make a fire in the cooking pit, so that the stones grow hot as for baking a whole deer at feast-time. And then you must pour water on the fire, and lay him on the hot stones, and pour more water on him so that the rug is kept wet and cannot scorch. Keep him so from the first owl hoot until the daylight comes again. And through all that time, there must be a great beating on the dance drums, to drive the evil fever spirits out of him. When morning comes, take him from the pit, and fold him in dry rugs and lay him on his own bed-place; and tend his wounds with the green salve, here."

"I will do all as you say, my mother."

But there was one more thing that he must do before he took the bundle



that she held out to him. He pulled the three kestrel feathers from his headband, and laid them beside the hearth. Then he took the bundle. It was over, and he must be away.

Ia looked from him to the kestrel feathers and back again. "Little cub, all these things I have given you, and told you how to use them; but think well before you go. Once, the Horned One has given you back to us, but there can be no second time."

"I understand," Tethra said. "I have thought well, and my heart is torn in two. But I must go."

Still she held him, with her strange dark eyes. "Think, too, that though my magic is strong, the fever spirits are strong also, and there is no knowing



what harm the deer's horn may have done within him; and if he dies, this Golden Chief of yours, assuredly his people will kill you also."

"That also, I understand," Tethra said. "But still I must go."

"Go, then, for the thing is on your forehead. Go, Cub, and run with the dog-pack if it may be so." And Ia took his face between her hands and kissed him. And he hitched up the bundle and went, out into the pale light of morning, and through the gap in the thorn hedge, and away over the moors towards the Glen of the Chariot-Crossing.

The sun was climbing towards noon, when he came down to the settlement, and this time there was no slipping through the shadows and the cover of

the hazel scrub. This time he walked straight towards the gateway; and the dogs barked, then came running low with yelps and whimpers of greeting.

A warrior standing in the gateway straightened on his spear shaft. It was Ord Long Arm. "Tethra?" Then shouted over his shoulder, "Brothers!—Tethra comes to the gate!"

Other men came running at his call.

"Tethra!"

"It is Tethra—or his ghost!"

"What do you want here?"

"Go back to where you come from!"

Two or three spears were levelled at him; the faces in the gateway were frowning and uncertain.

"Let me in to Conan my father," Tethra said, confronting them.

“The Chief is sick. He was gored by a stag at the hunting.”

“That I know. And I know also that you cannot lay this on my shoulders, as you have laid all other bad things that have happened to the Clan; for it is more than seven moons since I last walked out through this gateway.”

The Old One had come hobbling up on his blackthorn staff, and he thrust his crumpled and twitching face into Tethra's. “Then walk out through it again. There is nothing for you here. The Chief is dying.”

“If you let me in, it may be that he will not die,” Tethra said.

“So? Did we not pay a black bull-calf to the healer priest? And for all his magic, there was nothing he could do. Out!”



“I also bring magic with me.” The boy did not give back one finger’s breadth.

“Magic of the Dark People! How do we know that it is not a killing magic?”



Tethra looked round at the watching faces. And when he spoke, his voice had a strange new ring to it, as though he was a man already, and a chief. "How? By this: that if the Chief dies, I know that you will kill me also."

The warriors looked at each other, and one of them said, "Surely the finger of the Sun Lord is on him!"

The Old One hawked and spat. "Are you all mad, that you would trust this *creature*, with his Magic of the Dark Ones?"

But Ord Long Arm, though grudgingly, was of another way of thinking. "Peace, Old One, since nothing else will save the Chieftain, what harm can there be? Let him try."

And slowly, some for and some still

against, they made way for Tethra, and he passed through.

In the houseplace that had been his home until seven moons ago, there was a frightening strangeness, and already the women were keening as though for the dead. The Chief lay in the central space beside the hearth where there was more air to breathe than in the side chambers. His eyes were half-closed, half-open, in a face that had no flesh between the darkened skin and the skull. And for a heartbeat of time, Tethra checked on the threshold, thinking that after all, he had come too late. Then Conan turned his head very slowly and saw him in the doorway, and his eyes opened, bright with fever, but knowing who it was he saw.

“Tethra?” he said, thick and slurred; and his eyes clouded and half-closed again.

“Conan, my father, I am here.”

Tethra was kneeling beside him. He lifted the covering and bent to look close at the great torn places that the stag’s antlers had left in shoulder and flank and thigh. “Ayee! These are wounds indeed!” He let the covering fall back, and turned on the keening women. “Cease that yowling, and make a fire to heat the stones in the cooking pit. Then bring here to me the biggest and thickest rugs you have.”

The women broke off their keening, and stared at him with open eyes and mouths.

“Go!” Tethra said, still in his new



man's voice. "Do as I say. I have a healing magic, but soon it will be too late. Go!"

And, startled and white faced and whispering together, the women went.

Then Tethra pulled the wooden stopper from the flask with his teeth, and raising the Chief's head on his arm, held it to his mouth. "Now drink, my father, and sleep, and be well again."

So all things were done as Ia had directed. And at evening, when the stones in the long cooking pit before the houseplace were glowing hot, the fire was quenched, and the sleeping chieftain, packed about with medicine-herbs and wrapped close in skin rugs, was lowered into it, while the warriors squatted round with the wolf-skin

drums against their knees. And all night long, under the little wind from the sea, Tethra himself kept the skin rugs wet, so that Conan lay in a cloud of strange bitter-smelling steam. And all night long the dance drums throbbed and rattled and coughed, driving the fever spirits away.

At last the darkness began to wear thin, and the bellies of the high-sailing clouds were feathered with light; and presently the light spilled over from the sky, down the Glen of the Chariot-Crossing, and the morning had come. Then the drums fell silent, and the weary drummers sagged forward where they sat.

Tethra and three of the warriors lifted Conan from the cooking pit, and un-

folded the sodden rugs. He was still sleeping, but it was no longer the heavy-breathing sleep of Ia's draught; and his body that last night had been burning dry, was cool and damp to the touch.

The warriors looked at each other, half-afraid. "Aiee!" they said, "that was a magic indeed!"

And even the Old One wagged his head but found no ill-omened word to say.

Tethra got up, and looked round at them, standing tall. He felt as though something within him would burst if he did not crow to the morning. "A Magic of the Dark People! And I brought it! I, Tethra! . . . But now it is time to lay him on the bed-place and salve the wounds."



More than a moon went by, before Conan crawled out to sit in the late autumn sunshine in front of the house-place doorway. And in the midst of that time, Tethra had gone with the other boys of his year to the Holy Place for the Feast of New Spears, and come back with the blue-pricked scars of his new Manhood raw on his breast and shoulders, to take his place among the warriors of the Clan.

“Ach!” Conan grunted, putting aside his supporting arm and folding up to sit with his back against the rowan-wood doorpost. “I am as weak as a half-drowned pup.”

Tethra squatted down beside him. “You will grow strong again, Conan my father.”



Conan's eyes were narrowed as he looked away over the levels towards the shingle ridge that kept out the sea. "Aye, thanks to the Dark People's Magic, that you risked your own life to bring to me, Dark Son." His gaze moved slowly, following an arrow-head of wild duck until it was lost to sight. "Was it hard, to choose?"

Tethra looked up from picking at his manhood scars where they still itched. "It hurt—here inside me it hurt. But I did not have to choose. Ia my mother said that if you take a wolf-cub young enough from its own kind, it will run with the dog-pack—even to the hunting of wolf, when it is grown . . . But maybe it hurts the wolf-cub, too."







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